

Baucus names CHIP as top priority

By MATT GOURAS - Associated Press Writer - 02/22/07 (Helena Independent Record)

HELENA — U.S. Sen. Max Baucus told state lawmakers Wednesday that he will get more federal money for children's health insurance if they agree to expand the program in Montana.

The Democrat, speaking to a joint session of the Legislature, said both political parties should work together to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP.

"I'll do my part in Washington. You do your part here in Helena," Baucus said.

Baucus promised to use his position as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee to get more federal money for the program. He said Montana's current eligibility requirements are among the most stringent.

A number of ideas are percolating in the Legislature to expand the eligibility pool for the program. One that has cleared the Senate would let people into the program who make less than 175 percent of the poverty level — up from 150 percent.

"I'm asking you in the House to take it up," Baucus said. "Because I think it's the right thing to do."

Baucus said the nation will ultimately have to have universal health care for everyone, but said it will come in little parts over time.

Baucus, a state legislator in 1973 before he was elected to Congress, said CHIP expansion is his number one priority. It currently covers 13,000 in Montana with a combination of state and federal money.

Baucus also addressed the war in Iraq. His nephew is one of 15 Montanans who have been killed in Iraq, according to military and Associated Press records.

"We may not all agree on the best course of action in Iraq. But we all agree on one thing: it's time for the government of Iraq to stand on its own," Baucus said. "And it's time for our Montana men and women to come home as soon as possible."

Republican state Senate Leader Corey Stapleton of Billings said Baucus is wrong on Iraq.

"He grossly misjudged Montanans' commitment to seeing a fledgling Democracy grab hold and succeed," said Stapleton. "Someone who's a statesman and looking at the big picture should know better that anything worthwhile, anything worth fighting for, doesn't come within a couple of years."

But Baucus' speech focused on health care.

CHIP expansion could run into roadblocks in the House controlled by Republicans. Baucus said it doesn't need to.

"Let's stand up, work together and forget this partisan stuff," Baucus said.